GRAMMATICAL THEORY AND L2 ACQUISITION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Serious research in second-language acquisition has a relatively short history by comparison with that of research in other areas of language development. L2 acquisition study would be difficult to trace back more than perhaps fifteen years. Moreover, this brief history is one that is characterized, until only two or three years ago, largely by exclusively data-driven descriptive work. That is, from the early investigation of morpheme-acquisition orders (Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Dulay and Burt, 1974; Bailey, Madden, and Krashen, 1974) to some of the more recent resuscitation of language-transfer research considered from the perspective of pidgins' typology (Zobl, 1982, 1984a; Rutherford, 1983), hierarchies of accessibility (Gass, 1979; Gass and Ard, 1984), etc., the emphasis has been upon delineation of the path followed by the L2 learner in pursuit of target objectives and upon the extent to which this L2 acquisition route does or does not resemble that of the child in the acquisition of L1. It is essentially a record of research in need of, if not implicitly in search of, theories of L2 acquisition within which to accommodate and account for the data being described.

The thrust of the above work then is largely descriptive, in that it stops short of seeking an explanation for the data patterns that have been discovered. Thus, for example, the morpheme-acquisition research did not address itself to the question of why the morpheme orders should not have occurred as described; language-typological research did not look for an explanation as to why L1 canonical word-order does not transfer in the early L2 production of planned language (Rutherford, 1983); research within the paradigm of classical contrastive analysis did not venture to ascertain why the effects of some L1 X upon some L2 Y for some category Z was not necessarily a two-way street (i.e. that there need not be the reverse effect of L1 Y upon L2 X for the same category). This summary characterization, however, is by no means intended necessarily to disparage the descriptive work in question--indeed, painstaking analysis of the inter-language product has led to many valuable insights and has forced the revision of a number of assumptions as to how the learning of second languages proceeds. Moreover, ongoing research--e.g. Andersen (1984)--suggests that such insights have anything but dried up. And it is well to remember that not the least of the benefits to have derived therefrom is the recog-
nition of what L2 acquisition research itself can contribute to grammatical theory.

There is a fundamental distinction to be drawn, however, between the kind of research just described and particular kinds of L2 acquisition study that have begun to emerge within the last two or three years. The difference is one that arises not so much from what constitutes the language phenomena under scrutiny as from what questions are being posed with respect to those phenomena. That is, previously the principal questions to be addressed (whether explicitly or not) had to do with the nature of the acquisition route traversed by the L2 learner in moving toward the target criterion. The questions more recently addressed, however, have to do with the nature of a language acquisition faculty that on the one hand can compute to language constructs not present in the learner's L2 input but on the other hand more often than not falls short of the attainment of target criteria.

There are a number of recent papers that concern themselves to varying degrees with the question of how second languages come to be acquirable. Some of these studies formally addressing the question at least in part from the perspective of Chomskyan UG (Clahsen, 1985; Clahsen and Muysken, 1986; Felix, 1985a,b; Flynn, 1984; Flynn and Espinal, 1985; Hilles, 1986; Kean, 1984; White, 1985a,b,c, 1986), others from the perspective of current typological research (with often considerable overlap between the two) (Comrie, 1984; Eckman, 1982; Hawkins, 1985; Rutherford, 1983, 1987; Zobl, 1984, 1986). One of the most interesting aspects of much of this work--all the more so given the diverse theoretical stances--is common (often tacit) recognition that what has come to be known as the "logical problem" of language acquisition (Hornstein and Lightfoot, 1981) applies not only to L1 acquisition but to L2 as well. The "problem" of course is the well-known one of explaining how knowledge of target grammar is acquired given its severe underdetermination in the learner's available evidence, or how the learner can "project" from the primary data to their corresponding underlying structural properties. The theoretical status of this question is of such importance that we will let it serve as something of an organizational heuristic for discussion of the L2 acquisition research under consideration.

Not the least attractive aspect of recent research in L2 acquisition is the fact that we have the advancement of precise claims--claims that make predictions about the shape and development of interlanguage (IL) and that consequently may be tested. This precision can be attributed to both the typology and UG paradigms, although, as we shall see, the two may differ considerably in their theoretical assumptions. As for the methodological assumptions, claims about L2 acquisition emanating from a UG perspective are concerned largely with the effect upon IL of the parameterization concept; claims emanating from a typological perspective are given their most precise articulation in terms of implicational universals. Let us then consider what is being said by the claimants in question.

One of the most extensive contributions to L2 acquisition research from a UG position is to be found in a collection of recent papers by White